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The Story of Chantecler



Marco F. Liberma

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THE STORY OF CHANTECLER



CHANTECLER

THE STORY OF CHANTECLER

A
Critical Analysis of Rostand's Play

BY

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Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

(Hamlet, Act I, Scene I.)

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THE STORY OF CHANTECLER.

A FEW days before the first public performance of Rostand's play, M. Claude Mill gave in the *Gil Blas* what one may call the external history of *Chantecler*. This was not much more than a chronology of hopes deferred, but the facts presented there will prove none the less interesting. They will go far towards explaining the many difficulties that beset the play before it could at last be publicly performed.

On June the 5th, 1903, the day after Rostand's reception by the French Academy, he confided to a journalist friend of his that since writing "*l'Aiglon*" (in 1900) he had not written a single verse, not one, . . . but he was returning that day to Cambo with the firm determination to write a play. He had two or three of them composed in his mind. He would write one of them, of that he was sure. On the 28th of June of that year, Rostand and his family left Paris for their lovely country-place, the

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fairy-like château at Cambo, on the western slopes of the Pyrenees. On the 25th of October, 1904, Pierre Mortier wrote that Coquelin had just returned to Paris from Cambo, bringing with him a new play by Edmond Rostand, a play which was entirely finished, and which would surely be represented that year. Coquelin's enthusiasm knew no bounds. He affirmed that his rôle would certainly be, together with that of Cyrano, the most beautiful in his career as an actor. Urged by newspaper men to give the title of the play, Coquelin would not do so, but left it to Rostand to let them know that and more; for Rostand had expressed a desire that all this be absolutely left to him. But the play would be given during the season of 1904-1905 at the Gaieté, and this announcement was to be considered official. In view of the fact that we had to wait six years more for the play, the above statements are interesting and significant.

It was not until the 8th of December of the year 1904, that anything was known of the title of the play. Rostand himself, it is said, had long been uncertain as to what the title should be. A month later, Adolphe Brisson, the dramatic critic of *Le*

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Temps, returned from Cambo. "You will find," he wrote, "in the play Rostand has just finished, a revelation of the emotions which nature gives him. The play now needs but a few touches here and there. . . . This work of revision is so tiresome! Coquelin, indeed, upbraids him for his indolence." During that year, however, on February 23rd and the 9th of April, Rostand,—“the indolent Rostand,”—published two poems in the *Figaro*; one of these a long poem of six hundred lines on the words of the French language.

The following year, on the 29th of January, 1906, Rostand is in Paris and it is said that Mme. Simone Le Bargy has been approached with reference to a rôle in *Chantecler*. Later, in April, Rostand is again in Paris and seems anxious to avoid all discussion of the play; but the fact leaks out that the first act is to be situated in a barn-yard. A year later, April 1907, it is learned that Galipaux is to play the part of the Black-bird. In February 1908, Mlle. Augustine Leriche is engaged for the rôle of the Guinea-fowl. All this is slow up-hill work, and gives one the impression that the whole barn-yard is being moved on the

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American plan of moving buildings. Finally, in November 1908, all the Paris papers are deluged with notes and announcements regarding the play, the actors, and even the rehearsals, which are said to be in full progress. Two months later, the great Coquelin, who was to play the rôle of Chantecler, is taken sick. He is forced to leave Paris. This was on the 10th of January, 1909. On the 27th of January, Coquelin was dead.

Then followed two months of search after the actor who should adequately assume the crushing leading rôle of the play. Not a day passed without bringing its share of contradictory statements and more or less nerve-racking incidents with regard to this matter. Finally, after many names had been mentioned in connection with the leading rôle, M. Guitry was engaged for the part on the 8th of March, 1909, and the rest, says M. Claude Mill, to whom I am indebted for the above notes, is contemporary history. Indeed this contemporary history brings us to the flood,—the Paris flood, when the play had to be postponed still further. One can easily understand the suspense, the curiosity, the impatience that awaited the opening

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night,—an opening night which remains the most memorable in the history of the French stage during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, if not of all times, unless it be the opening night of Beaumarchais' *Mariage de Figaro*, which is the only first performance that can be compared to it.

And the world knew not only that *Chantecler* had at last been played, but that *Chantecler* was the best advertised proposition that had ever come on the boards. All kinds of insinuations were generously made. The delay, it was said, was to be attributed to a desire on the part of those most interested to keep expectancy at a white heat. A careful reading of the play, however, is sure to lead one to the conclusion that the difficulties in so handling the theme as to make of it a playable play, must have been mainly responsible for the delay. These difficulties, indeed, must have been such as to seem at times almost insurmountable. Rostand himself confessed this much when interviewed with regard to his work. And here it is well to give more at length the author's own statements as to his play.

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During the last days of the year 1902 (this does not quite tally with M. Mill's dates), the elder Coquelin, who was preparing to visit the States, received in Paris a telegram signed by Rostand in which he was asked to come immediately to Cambo to talk over a new play. Coquelin at once buckled his valise and boarded the Sud-Express. One can imagine Coquelin's surprise when he was told smilingly that the scene of the play would be a farm-yard, that all the characters would represent animals, and that he, Coquelin, was to choose the rôle of the cock.

"Is that serious?" asked Coquelin.

"Very serious, indeed," affirmed Rostand, this time without laughing.

"And how did that idea ever come to you?"

"As I was taking a walk. A few weeks ago a chance ramble led me to a small neighboring farm. I entered the yard to ask for a cup of milk; and there I saw a spectacle that struck me. Amongst heaps of hay, and a solitary cart, its shafts pointing to the sky, a number of animals were playing, free and gladsome, like laborers returned to their lodging, the day's work being ended. Before

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me were chickens, ducks, a cat, a dog, a turkey, which seemed to chirp and chatter and tell the latest gossip of the day. Against the wall, in a cage, a black-bird from time to time emitted a cry as though he were jeering at somebody; you would have thought that he was punning. A cock entered, haughty, erect, superb, and, of a sudden, all private conversation ceased. He crossed the yard, dignified, somewhat theatrical, without haste, like a tenor with an eye to effect. Suddenly he became the center of attention. The dog played about him amicably, the duck in fear got out of his way, the black-bird was silenced, the hens advanced, submissive and affectionate. All this little world acknowledged his superiority, greeted him as a hero. And why, after all, should he not be a hero, and even a hero of drama? This idea crossed my mind. . . . In short, replace this cock, this dog, this black-bird, this duck, these hens, by men and women, you have characters of the stage, passions of the stage, a scene that can be staged. Then, since the play could be possible with men and women, why not keep what is picturesque in it, by making these animals, at bot-

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tom so little different from us, act, think, and speak like human beings? ”

Coquelin was somewhat disturbed. An hour later he was won over. The poet had read to him passages from his work, of which nearly five hundred lines were already written. Rostand had given him a general outline of the play. Coquelin enthusiastically exclaimed that he would be Chantecler.

But this was not enough. Why, having to express human feelings, did he not put in action men and women? For the thorough understanding and appreciation of the play Rostand's answer to this is important. “Because,” he answered, “I wished to write a modern play in verse. Now the lyrical qualities of a poetic production do not go well with the modern suit and the common-place frock-coat. It needs the additional costume. One must turn back for this to two or three centuries, at least, or be obliged to set the play in countries of which the customs, the language, and interests are very far from our own. But a poet may have the desire to express modern ideas with a modern vocabulary, to allude to happenings of the day the

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most Parisian, to laugh as one laughs on the boulevard in 1910, and to think as one thinks in France in the twentieth century. A problem difficult to solve! The sight of my barn-yard at Cambo immediately offered me a solution. Why, here was the costume dreamt of,—if one can say so!—there indeed was the means of remaining modern, and at the same time that of being picturesque and lyrical! Characters garbed in animal dress, expressing themselves like human beings,—like Parisians of the day. What a find! And, furthermore, what an opportunity to speak of things in nature, to be deeply moved by flowers, birds, the bits of grass, or the insect . . . and what a setting! . . . No, really, a poet could not wish for a more beautiful theme.”

The subject-matter, therefore, strange and sensational as it may seem, was chosen first and foremost because it lent itself to a treatment of the life, the thoughts, and aspirations of the day, while it gave full scope to the poetic fancy, pleasing the eye with varied color of dress and landscapes, pleasing the ear with musical lines now sweet and soft when the Nightingale sings, now resounding

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like a trumpet blast when Chantecler calls on the sun to rise. Rostand's verse does indeed sway and toss and lull and sing in a way that was never attempted before in the drama of France or elsewhere. In the opening prologue to the play there is a double reference to La Fontaine and to Beethoven. One can imagine that the shades of La Fontaine and Beethoven were ever present before the poet's mind as he made the animals dear to La Fontaine pass before him, and this to rhythmical numbers of which music alone can give an idea, music the most varied as coming from the most moody and passionate of singers.

But was there to be any meaning, any symbolism in the use of these animal characters? To this Rostand answered that *Chantecler* was to be the drama of human endeavor grappling with life. The Cock represents man loving passionately his chosen vocation, man who has faith in his work, and who will allow nothing to sway him in its accomplishment. He meets the Pheasant, representing woman, the modern woman: emancipated, independent, domineering; jealous of the male's high task; who means to enslave him to her sole affec-

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tion; and who yields only after she has been overcome, brought to submission, with, perhaps, the secret hope that she may still some day hold sway over him and thus be avenged. We have here the eternal struggle that opens with the Book of Genesis, the struggle to reach some compromise by which man and woman are to be made cognizant of their respective places, accept the station in life imposed upon them by virtue of some yet unrecognized, but none the less stringent, restrictions in their natures. On the one hand we have the will to do, untrammelled by physical and social limitations on which nevertheless hangs the very existence of the race; on the other hand, the will to be, for the purpose that transcends man's very dream. And it is because this passiveness demanded of woman, and through which her power for good over man seems doubled a hundredfold, arouses in this day opposition so fierce as to endanger the very life of the family, the poet thought it well to sound a note of warning. Chantecler and the Pheasant are the will and the feelings at war with each other. The will and the affections are at war in the breast of each one of us.

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This is best exemplified, however, because of physical and consequently social reasons, in a struggle between the sexes.

The Dog in the play, Rostand went on to say, was the philosopher: kindly, and ever ready to do service. The Black-bird was the "boulevardier," truly Parisian; he turns all things into a joke; he puns, he jeers, rails, and scoffs. The noblest, purest ideals pass as little unscathed by his taunts as does the Nightingale when harassed by the taunts of the ugly Toads foaming at the mouth. The Guinea-fowl is the busy-body, the rattle-brained parvenu, snobbish to a degree. Her doors are opened wide to receive the strangest medley of people from the four corners of the earth, but her inflated pride sets itself up like a scare-crow to keep away the smaller birds shorn of all consequence, the poor relations whose presence fits so ill in a high *Salon*. There are also Birds of Night in the play; they represent the envious hatred of all that is clean and loves the light.

The enumeration of all these characters in the play already points to a philosophy which, for an artist, should also be a philosophy of life. It is

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here a defiance hurled against all ostentation, an appeal to reason and to duty, a realization of the fact that life's work on the most humble scale looms large where love and self-sacrifice go hand in hand; that man, beast, sun, and trees, have an appointed task in the world, to shirk which is darkness and chaos. One is reminded of the noble exhortation in Matthew: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

And now, after having given an exposition of Rostand's intentions as expressed by him and evidenced by a study of the play itself, it may be asked to what extent has the poet been successful in producing a play that is coherent, playable, and artistic as a whole? Rostand is a poet; he needed a subject that lent itself to poetic treatment, that gave full scope for picturesque effects in the setting, that could fill the eye with beauty of color as well as the ear with beauty of song. It is significant that Shakespeare has not given us a single play presenting men and women in the London of his own day. He has gone to the past or to Italy, or to Bohemia, Denmark, France, Greece, Vienna,

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but not to the London of his day, nor to Spain. Distance in poetry evidently does lend enchantment, except where traditional or present hatred exists against a given nation, as was, in the time of Shakespeare, the case of the English against Spain. Under these conditions direct contemporary social satire is well-nigh out of the question in the poetic drama. The use of the animals in *Chantecler* made this possible; it allowed both for social satire, and a display of the gaudy feathered tribe in picturesque, poetic scenes. Amongst the many conventionalities that the theater-going public accepts at all times, the poet was to render acceptable one that had not seen the boards for many a year, although it had had the sanction of antiquity, indeed of no less a poet than Aristophanes. In the midst of the most cultured and most æsthetic community the world has ever seen, Aristophanes, for the purpose of presenting social satire, had written such plays as the *Birds*, the *Clouds*, the *Frogs*; there was no reason why the same could not be done in our own day, and why the play could not be called *Chantecler*, after the name of the cock in the animal epic of mediæval days.

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The difficulty was to forestall curiosity, to prepare the minds of the hearers to receive what was said by the new and strange gathering on the stage. For this purpose, Rostand introduced a prologue to create an atmosphere in a way that had never been used before. The audience would be expectant, it would be curious to see what was on the stage; but why not have this audience create the scene in imagination before the curtain rose? A good deal was to be taken for granted, and why could not the public be made to co-operate with the poet from the start? They were to imagine the farm; imagine also the farmer, his family, and the farm hands leaving the premises for a Sunday's outing. They could be made to hear the horse jogging away, hear the clatter of hoofs die in the distance, down the valley, from where the human voices rose fainter and fainter. And in the silence there arose new sounds; the flap of wings, the sharp rap of beaks and of clawed feet, and Nature was felt stealthily entering in one's dream. The manager of the play was to be the cuckoo-bird. Hushed in silence, you saw the curtain slowly upward go, and you could well think that

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the wood-pecker's knocks had begun this show.

From all accounts nothing could have been more ingenious, more subtle, and more exquisite, than the lines of the prologue, delivered before the footlights prior to raising the curtain,—even though they were delivered by a gentleman in black, much to the chagrin of the critics, who somehow wanted the lines without the man, or, to be more exact, the man, if needs be, but wearing more picturesque clothes. The audience, after the curtain went up, when the scene gradually came to view, could sit back and nod approvingly at what their imagination had already been led to evolve. They could forget themselves and allow their fancy to roam pleasantly amid the quiet, familiar scene as Rostand had seen it, on the memorable day when after a long ramble he entered the farm-yard near Cambo and stood surprised at the sight of the picturesque world before him of hens, ducks, pompous turkey-cocks, the pert black-bird, the watch-dog, and the sly soft-treading cat, never so awake as when basking in the sun seemingly half asleep.

And now the audience is ready to take its time

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to hear what this little world has to say. We learn their little likes and dislikes. They have their trouble-maker, and their weighty, pedantic Turkey, thoroughly satisfied with himself as he passes judgment or gives his lesson. The Pigeon is the mail-carrier, inquisitive, and wrought up to a degree in his desire to get a glimpse of the great Chantecler. A large butterfly-net suddenly thrust from over the wall has barely missed a fine flower on the wing. Man in the play is never seen. From time to time we are made aware that he is back of this world like cruel fate, bringing death and destruction at any moment.

Of a sudden a long deep note is heard. The Black-bird is sure that when Chantecler advances and cries out thus, it is a sign that he loves or meditates a song. And the song indeed breaks out in ecstasy, triumphant. It is his song to the Sun and such as a Greek of old would have sung to Apollo; a pæan to the god whose vivifying influence in the world about us is everywhere felt and seen, for he brings to all that love the light rich gifts of health and of beauty. His rays play the magician with earth and trees. He tips with

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the splendor of gold and of precious stones, alike the grain and the dew, the hive of the bee and the soap bubbles in the rustic vat. The song thus goes on, the Black-bird may scoff, the Turkey find fault, the rest go about picking nurture for the life they bear within them, Chantecler has not yet finished his whole tribute to the life-giver of all, and finally, when he has done so, he finds pleasure in the fact that he has satisfied the ardor of the smaller visitor to the farm, the humble mail-carrier, who shall long remember and often repeat what he has seen and heard.

After his song to the Sun is ended, Chantecler, unlike the oriental mystic satisfied with mere contemplation, will add good works to his good song. He looks about him, gives counsel, sees to the welfare of all, and then turns to sing again, happy and contented in his lot. The good Patou, the philosophic Watch-dog, has it as his duty to put people on their guard. Optimism is, to be sure, the meet attribute of the lover of Light, but one must not be blinded by optimism. True strength is that of the good who know and shun evil. Exuberance that makes one ignore the dark recesses of the



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soul, is beset with pitfalls and is akin to weakness. Chantecler, the optimist, slow to be convinced of evil and to whom, above all others, some degree of watchfulness is necessary, needs to beware of the miry depths in the soul of the jeering Blackbird. He must also keep good watch over his heart. He will not stoop to go to the feather-brained, cold-hearted, fidgety Guinea-fowl,—to her five o'clock tea—but what if his heart were to get the better of his reason and he follow blindly because love bids him go?

It has often been remarked that none of Rostand's plays are exclusively devoted to the development of a love-theme. Roxane does not love Cyrano, and many a scene in *Cyrano de Bergerac* has nothing whatever to do with love. So in *Chantecler* we find the love theme introduced not as an end unto itself; on the contrary, it is rather shown as the great hindrance. Let the Pheasant come and Chantecler will have to decide, and the Pheasant will have to decide with him, that the high song must go first. Love is essentially selfish, at least so is the love that does not expand heart and brain and make one's being go out to a larger

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world than self. We all remember the pitiful story in Browning's *Andrea del Sarto*; the desperate efforts of the painter to make Lucrezia share in his ambition, spur him on: "We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!" Then follows the dejected ending of poor Andrea, weak and dragging his love-chain:

"I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.

I regret little, I would change still less.

Since there my past life lies, why alter it?

.

What would one have?

In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance.

.

So—still they overcome

Because there's still Lucrezia,—as I choose."

The burden of Rostand's theme is that *Chantecler's* choice must be other: it must be first and foremost his high vocation, and where this must take second place it becomes then a choice between the ideal of the East and the ideal of the West, and we begin over again the struggle that made Greece turn against Troy. The Pheasant and

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Chantecler are thus made symbols of contrasting civilizations. She might have come from Colchis with Jason for all she knows.

And there is something of a Delilah in her too. Chantecler's strength and pride come from his belief that at his bidding the morning light springs from the Eastern heaven. It is a visionary's belief, as though man by pulling at his own coat-sleeve could wing his upward way. How easy it is to deride and shake it! Such a belief, when it ennobles life and one's calling, becomes sacred, and must be kept to oneself, lest in opening too freely one's heart the Black-bird's jeers may reach the soul and chill it. But the Pheasant will see to it that there be no secret hidden from her. It is night, all the Birds of darkness are conspiring to do away with the harbinger of Light. The Owl hails night that favors murder. The Screech-owl, and the Horn-owl, and the Wood-owl, and all that represent evil deeds done in darkness, take up the dirge, all hymning the song of death. Their cry brings to mind the hoarse croaking of the raven in *Macbeth*, and the fearful lines presaging murder:

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“ Now o’er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate’s offerings; and wither’d murder,
Alarum’d by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl’s his watch, thus with stealthy pace,
With Tarquin’s ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.”

No sooner is Chantecler’s first morning note heard, when darkness and its minions are struck with awe, and they waver. Light is soon to come. Their eyes and understanding cannot bear it. There is a tumbling rush all helter-skelter, and soon they disappear in search of the dark hole.

There is nothing more beautiful in its fine symbolism than this second act. The Pheasant is here with Chantecler and is bent on knowing his secret. She cajoles and pleads and pouts till Chantecler finally yields, seized in part by the desire to make her a partner to his mission.

He tells her how he begins to sing only after he has swept away the grass and the pebbles that hide the sweet, dark soil beneath. His strong

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claws come thus in close contact with the good earth; and it is half the mystery of his song, half the secret of his strength, this clinging to his native soil whence come to him his strength and his song even as a sap.

The song here is poured out in torrents. It goes far to show to what extent Rostand's verse comes near to having the qualities of modern music. It is so rich in volume, and holds us so long under its spell, that its extended appeal becomes griping and is at times almost unbearable. It has all the qualities, we say, it has also, in our opinion, all the defects of the mighty climax in operas such as *Tristan and Isolde*. We cannot help but feel that to produce such parts the composers have lashed themselves into a frenzy, and we are not quite certain whether this frenzy is not a sign of weakness, or, perhaps, and let us hope that this is so, if the appeal is made so strong, the reason is, not that we are more obtuse but that we are graced with nerves stronger and less liable to be shattered than were the nerves of our forefathers in the days of Mozart and of Haydn.

Chantecler's song, such as it is, is none the less

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lofty and magnificent. The Pheasant, spell-bound, listens breathlessly, admiring and finding but his name in answer to it. Chantecler calls upon the East to obey, for he is the Earth and he is Labor, and his crest has the design couched on the smithy's forge; he feels earth's rich furrow rising in his throat.

The Pheasant amazed looks on. She does not understand. It has transformed him. He seems mad. He falls back exhausted, and she takes up the song; and as she tells what she sees while the dawn brings things more and more clearly to view, Chantecler nods and calls these by name. Since rich love on that day is joined to his faith, the day has become, indeed, more beautiful than day. The sun is now risen. In the distance, shrill cries are heard. It is the other cocks. They sing when all is rosy. They believe in Light, but not sooner than when they can see it. Chantecler sang when all was dark. His song rose midst the shadows, and the first, "It is in darkness that belief in Light is best."

A great scene like this scarcely needs any further comment. The Pheasant now believes in

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Chantecler. She is proud of his achievement. But for how long? For as long, thinks Rostand, as Chantecler does not yield one iota of that which makes him great. Will Chantecler, then, go to the Guinea-fowl's party? The Pheasant has been invited. The Black-bird has seen to it that she should be invited, in order that he may have the opportunity of jeering at Chantecler in case he should follow her. When the hen of Houdan asked Chantecler whether he would go, he answered "No." The Pheasant looking up to him from the bottom rung of a ladder said, "Yes." Chantecler, perplexed, asked, "Why so?" "Because you said to the other, 'No,' " was the Pheasant's reply. The philosophic Patou, made aware that Chantecler was about to yield, immediately interfered, for Chantecler would, indeed, have his fill, were he to yield.

After the magnificent song to the sun has come to an end, the Black-bird appears to remind the Pheasant of the five o'clock party. He has also overheard the great secret. He has a knowing wink in his eye. What a clever piece of Don Juanism that song was, he says. The Pheasant is

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embarrassed. She is becoming self-centered again. The Black-bird has brought her once more down to earth. She determines to leave him with Chantecler. When Chantecler asks her where she is going, the Black-bird, quick to perceive her embarrassment at the frivolous change in her, jeers and explains. She is none the less still under the spell of Chantecler's noble song, and, seeing how high he has soared, she will excuse him from accompanying her. She has not the courage to allow herself to fall in with Chantecler's melancholy mood, for the Black-bird is near and she fears a Black-bird's ridicule. She flips the matter off her mind with merry off-hand answers: She will soon be back; he may stay; she must go; she must show his sunshine on her dress. And so the robe of sunshine on her soul has slipped off to give place to the variegated mantle that held all her attention and wrapped the worldly minded coquette.

The heart soon finds a reason to paralyze the will. The Black-bird warns Chantecler that there is trouble in store for him at the Guinea-fowl's. Chantecler, exasperated, dares to go. One can easily conjecture that any other bad reason would



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have proved fully as good to draw him to where the Pheasant has gone. This brings us to the third act of the play: *The Reception Day at the Guinea-fowl's*, as Rostand calls it; just as the first act is significantly entitled, *The Evening of the Pheasant*, because of her coming to the farm so foreign to her tastes. We cannot imagine more lashing sarcasm—one cannot even call it satire—than is poured in this third act on all that is superficial, bloated with vain-glory, empty of all generous impulse, devoid of feeling, real dignity, and grace. One can excuse this act on the ground that the poet has willed what he did. The very theme of *Chantecler* had been chosen because it could lead up to it.

In this third act, therefore, one is more especially impressed with the great contrast presented in the life of Chantecler as compared with the life he led before. It is possible that when the historian in the years to come shall look for a picture of that which lent itself to ridicule in our day, he will turn to this act of *Chantecler*, even as we must look to the *Misanthrope* for a corresponding picture of much that lay open to ridicule in the days

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of Molière. Rostand's first attack is directed against ostentation, where the beautiful parlors, the marvelous collections of bric-a-brac, the palm leaves and the hidden orchestras, the invited guests and the ushers, serve but as a means for vulgar display of self, are but a mode of advertising self. The Guinea-fowl has constantly at her beak's end an "I did it," "I have it," "I thought of it." Beautiful parlors, marvelous collections, musicians, invited guests, palm leaves and all, could be heaped like a haystack for all she cares. She would crawl to the top of them to show her large ego.

The second attack is directed against the pompous Peacock. He represents another form of fatuity. His is not so much the vulgar ostentation of what money can do and buy, as the desire to dazzle by a display of his learning. Our Peacock is sententious. He delivers himself in tones loud and discordant. His very voice betrays his insincerity. He speaks of Ruskin in sentences rich in alliteration. Were he to fail in his efforts to impress the by-standers with the vast powers of his intellect, he would bring before them as a strong argument the sturdy display of his rich train.

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Another phase of modern life covered with ridicule in the play, is indiscriminate cosmopolitanism. These are the days of travel, when so many people are strangers to their own land. There are forty-eight varieties of Cocks gathered round the Guinea-fowl. Who can tell how many different nationalities go to make up a reunion in a modern Parisian five o'clock tea? This is not the place to find fault with Rostand for his being too exclusive a Frenchman, but it is difficult not to turn with regret to a past when people were more "stay-at-homes,"—each one in his own home, in the English and best sense of the word. Granted then that here is a lesson given to Frenchmen only, Rostand may well ask whether the Cock—the Gallic Cock—has a place in the midst of the strange medley that surrounds the strutting Peacock and the giddy Guinea-fowl. Chantecler must needs have company, but Rostand would have him dispense with the company he now finds himself in. The Cock loses his temper. He is about to spoil the all-absorbing five o'clock tea. He gives his lesson to the assembly and in doing so he is, perhaps, all the more bitter because of the unacknowl-

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edged grudge he bears against them on the ground that they attract the Pheasant to them and spoil her. He waxes eloquent, and, moreover, he creates a sensation. An interview in behalf of the journals is therefore clearly indicated.

You are amused by this introduction of newspaper reporters in the play, for within the past few months, and in order to satisfy the curiosity of the public, Rostand's whole life has been turned inside out like a pocket. When Chantecler explains that he lives his life and sings his song by giving himself no end of trouble, his interviewers pass this unnoticed. They have a more important question to ask. The important question is this: when Chantecler emits his first call to Day, on what syllable does he lay the stress, is it on the first "Co," or the second "co," or is it on the "ri," or perhaps on the final "co"? Our Cock looks at his interviewers with bewilderment; they have missed the kernel and, like the Guinea-fowl and the Peacock, they have looked at the husks.

"Whence comes it," we read in Pascal, "that he who limps does not irritate us, while a halting mind does? The reason is that he who is lame ad-

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mits that we walk straight, while a lame intellect asserts that it is we who hobble: were it not for this we should feel pity more than anger." But woe betide the moralist who thinks he can bring down the lash with impunity on the lame intellects in high places. His attack, however open and fair, will be met with weapons against which he will be powerless. Chantecler is the hot, impetuous idealist. He enters the fray ready to give and to receive. He finds as his opponent the champion that the Birds of Night have made ready for him, and this champion has on his spurs sharp, pointed blades secretly attached to them. At every blow that fells Chantecler, the assembly stamps its feet with joy and bursts out in loud laughter. The Pheasant alone grieves and endeavors to help him.

This third act is at times altogether too bitter. To what extent is contemporary society really such as Rostand here depicts it? Will this presentation of it mar the success of his work when the novelty of the play will have worn off, and if so, shall we have to give the same explanation for the failure of the play—if failure there is to be—as could

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be given to explain the failure of other great plays in the past, the failure of the *Misanthrope*, for instance? It is indeed the greatest of puzzles to the student of literature to tell why such a drama as the *Misanthrope* met with so little success when it was first presented. Of all the plays Molière wrote, the box receipts for the *Misanthrope* were among the most disappointing. And yet there are few lovers of the stage who would not give to this play of Molière the very first place among the great comedies of the past. The whole social fabric of the seventeenth century, its essential qualities and short-comings, are revealed to posterity in that comedy. The reason for its failure to please at the time may be due to the fact that to the contemporaries of Molière the characters and situations presented in the *Misanthrope* must have been painfully real, so much so that many in the audience thought they could tell who the characters were in real life. But Molière's hearers went to the theater to find pleasure, not to blush and be made ashamed of themselves and of each other. They wanted cushions, not pins. Rostand's third act in *Chantecler* has, like the *Misanthrope*, too

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many pins. Fortunately, however, Rostand's best asset as a playwright is his keen feeling for dramatic effect, and his power to bring about such sudden changes in a scene as to sweep his hearers, so to speak, off their feet.

As an example of Rostand's power to enlarge of a sudden our point of view and give new meaning to the situations in his plays, let us turn to the end of the third act of the play we are now considering. Chantecler is tottering under the blows and jeers. Suddenly there is a lull. Chantecler is surprised and hopes that the good nature of the Guinea-fowl's guests is asserting itself. A large circling shadow about him makes him look up, and there, above the throng, he sees the ominous wheeling of the Sparrow-hawk, as the bird of prey is coming nearer and nearer upon them. It takes something more than a life of frivolity and cowardly hiding of blades to meet great calamities bravely. At this juncture all are eager to flock about Chantecler. He is the symbol of truth and open-mindedness. It is on him and on him alone that all can rely in time of danger. Though sorely tried by what has gone before, he comes to the

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rescue. The calamitous bird hesitates, then recedes, and finally, it disappears.

There is unmistakable grandeur imparted by this incident to Chantecler's attitude in the midst of the unthinking crowd. It matters little that, the danger once passed, the throng should turn again upon him. Chantecler comes out of the trial all the stronger, and his opponent, staggered by his sudden attack, trips, and in doing so there happens to him then what would surely have happened to him in the long run: he cuts one of his own legs with his own murderous knives. The Owl's predictions do not come true, and Light, contrary to their desires, does not stay long "in bondage to night, all affrighted."

The Pheasant, then, had come to the quiet, humdrum, every-day life of us all to trouble the senses and the heart. Her gaudy plumage, her rich experience of strange lands, the romance of bohemianism about her, made the lowly life seem pale and dreary in comparison. Chantecler has wooed and paid for it. Moments there were when the Pheasant understood his song and his ambitions. But she could not live his life. Chantecler

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has been the weaker of the two. He has followed her to an heterogeneous circle wholly foreign to his aims and tastes. In rising against a foolish set, given to gossip and to showy ease, he has learnt with bitterness that his place was to be elsewhere. Repeating the story of the *Misanthrope*, this latest copy of Molière's *Alceste* will leave everything behind him, follow the Pheasant, flee to the woods where he does not belong, in the hope that with her the roaming life will bring its compensation.

We are now in the heart of the forest, where gigantic trees have dug their knotted roots deep into the earth. A large spider's web is spread in full view, and there is no mistaking its meaning. There is also a snare hidden somewhere on the ground. Lightning has struck the base of one of the trees and burnt into it a yawning black chamber. There is a struggle going on in the heart of the forest even as in the jungle of society. Utopias are an inner dream, for in our world of reality the loveliest islands have their Caliban.

Since coming to the forest, Chantecler has yielded more and more to the Pheasant's bidding.

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Her love, knowing itself so strong, has become imperious; it has brooked no rivals. Can one imagine anything more galling to the man with a saving sense of the grotesque, and who, in consequence, cannot long be blinded by passion, than the thought that he is playing the coward with his better self. Chantecler longs for his farm. In a quaint episode he is seen speaking through the wild morning-glory,—the flower that is bell-shaped and opens with the dawn. He is speaking through this flower as through a telephone, to the Black-bird at the other end. How sweet is his recollection of all the little incidents that formerly filled his everyday life with homely everyday cares. But no sooner does the Pheasant appear when all conversation must immediately cease and some excuse be found to appease her anger.

Chantecler is not allowed to sing now as he did in former days. She must be all in all to him, and one note, not more than one, must suffice as his call to Day. He has so greatly fallen in her estimation that she sneers now, and is determined to show him that the sun can rise without his call. The episodes that follow are the

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most telling in the play. Chantecler seems to be losing more and more faith in himself. He needs a prop. He needs somebody who believes in him. He is now ready to listen to flattery. The ugly Toads of the forest, all mouth and all belly, with eyes bulging out as in envy, have come to him. They have come to complain of the song of the Nightingale. Chantecler has never yet heard the Nightingale sing. The ugly croakers may perhaps be right. He is amused and listens to them. As he does so, he is suddenly thrilled by the first notes of the sweet warbler. Here then, in the heart of the forest, the Nightingale, representing not only the singer of the beauties of night, but perhaps also the high singer of the contemplative, mystic life, has no less an envious pack arrayed against him than had Chantecler, the harbinger of day and the lofty idealist of labor in the midst of the foppish crowd gathered in the Guinea-fowl's *Salon*. Chantecler turns upon the filthy, ugly throng before him, that dared to compare his song to the Nightingale's song divine.

It is difficult to give in an account of the story of *Chantecler*, an idea of the beauty of the lines

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in the text, to which this study, it is hoped, will prove a fitting introduction and interpretative commentary. A great French critic in an essay on Victor Hugo's works dwells on the orchestral qualities of some of the great poet's verse. This orchestral quality in the poetry of Victor Hugo is even more pronounced in the poetry of Rostand, as is exemplified in this scene in our play.

In reply to Chantecler and to the song of the Nightingale, the Toads flaunt their ugliness. Swayed by the rhythm of the Nightingale's exquisite ditty, Chantecler takes up the measure, boldly, defiantly, as becomes the Trumpeter of Day. The envious crowds gradually recede till they are heard no more, while the rest of the forest seems to take new life in answer to Chantecler's generous call. "One must sing! sing! even when one knows that there are songs to be preferred to one's song." Sing till death,—the song here symbolizing noble aspirations,—is what Rostand clearly says, for the Nightingale has not had time to finish his song before he is brought down by a shot and falls dead at Chantecler's feet.

Chantecler is in despair. He sees dark within

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him. He mourns and needs to be soothed. Meanwhile the Pheasant has been watching the dawn that is gradually rising. She comes to Chantecler, covers him with her wing, uses soft words to beguile and lull him, and when the opportune moment for her has come, when she feels that her close touch at such a time when his soul is weakest and most impressionable will make him totter and perhaps give up the fight, she suddenly springs back with the exultant cry that he has but to look and see that the Sun can rise without his call!

If Rostand's play puts in action the everlasting problem of the heart struggling against the will, shows us the fight that must constantly be waged between darkness and light, between beauty and ugliness, between toil and shallow ease, it is also, as one can see clearly, a poet's profession of faith. One can imagine the bitter recriminations that should answer the Pheasant's treachery. But Chantecler has not the heart to do even that. He is at the critical moment in life when a man's whole past stands up before him; the subsequent act betraying the stuff of which one is made. The Pheasant clings to him and will have him believe

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that a heart held close to his is of far greater worth than a heaven not necessary; that where the depths of the shade hold two, darkness is well worth the day. Chantecler, bewildered, agrees to this, and then with a supreme effort, as though awakening from an ugly dream, he breaks away from her. When he has thus finally settled this matter with his own conscience, when the renaissance, the new birth, the "Vita Nuova," as Dante would call it, has become a clear reality within him, then he hears and the better understands the renewed song of a new warbler that has taken the place of the Nightingale that is dead. He can now exclaim triumphantly, and this constitutes the great ultimate lesson in the play, that when a man sees his dream dead, he has but one alternative: he must die of a sudden or else rise the stronger.

Chantecler disappears. The Pheasant is left to fret and show a temper. It may seem strange, but by no means difficult to understand that in this mood she should look up to Chantecler and love him best, and that she should now be willing and ready to give up her very life to save his. The Pheasant has been caught in the hidden mesh. The

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play is over, and Patou, the philosophic Watch-dog, calls down the curtain, urging that it come down quickly, for the stage is now to be given over to men. Indeed, it is given over to men, we add, to make or mar their lives on it at their will and pleasure.

Such then is the play, judging from what is expressed in the text and from what is left to be inferred from a careful study of it. It cannot be said that the lines always ring true, that one could not find here and there passages that in one's opinion the poet would have done well to alter or leave out altogether. This is largely a matter of personal taste. When a play is so replete with beauty, it seems ungracious to blur things by looking too closely at the page. Besides, time is the only impartial judge of matters literary. The plays that now rank among the very finest produced in France have been those that have met with fiercest opposition at the time when they were first presented; this was notably the case with Corneille's *Le Cid*, Racine's *Andromaque*, Molière's *Don Juan* and *Tartuffe*, and also the *Misanthrope*, to which we have already alluded. When Victor Hugo's

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Hernani was first put on the stage, there were few lines that escaped being hissed. One evening one of the actresses drew attention to the fact that the words she had to say in the play were thus far the only ones that had been spared. These words were: "My dear Count, our men must keep good watch with you." Victor Hugo assured her that they too would be hissed, and so they were, and that very evening. As regards Rostand, born in 1868 he is now not more than forty-two years old, he is in the prime of life, and he has already written, besides *Chantecler*, *les Romanesques*, *la Princesse Lointaine*, *la Samaritaine*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and *l'Aiglon*, five plays, each one of which, however much we may find fault with them, should more than suffice to establish a literary reputation.

II

WE have dwelt thus far on what we called the external history of *Chantecler*. We mean by that the story of *Chantecler* with reference to the general public,—a public that waited so long and so impatiently the first opening performance of the play. Then we gave a critical analysis of *Chantecler*. We hoped that our interpretation of it would not only reveal its meaning and its many beauties, but would also help us to catch a glimpse, as it were, of the author's workshop, make us realize the thousand and one notes and corrections rendered necessary by the difficulty of the theme, and lead us to justify the delay in the presentation of the play in view of the passing excellence of the result. There remains to consider the play from behind the footlights and the drop curtain,—to indicate what was done in the costuming and the staging of *Chantecler*.

The privileged few who were allowed access to

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the stage while the rehearsals for *Chantecler* were in progress, groped through the dark and hushed halls of the theater of the Porte-Saint-Martin to come upon a scene that must have been strange indeed. Mme. Simone, the Pheasant, for instance, could be met wearing a sort of kimono; to the back and sleeves of this gown were attached large wings, and as she daintily extended a feathered end to be touched in greeting, she would explain that practice alone could make her proficient in the use of wings instead of arms, or in the wearing of a gown shaped like a bird. This matter was far from being an unimportant one. "Tell the most impassioned orator, suddenly, that his wig is awry," quaintly remarks George Eliot in her *Amos Barton*, "or his shirt-lap hanging out, and that he is tickling people by the oddity of his person, instead of thrilling them by the energy of his periods, and you would infallibly dry up the spring of his eloquence." In order not to dry up the spring of their eloquence, those who assumed the more important rôles in *Chantecler*, men and women alike, had to get used to their strange clothes, so as not to be too self-conscious in them and thus draw too



MADAME LE BARGY AS THE HEN PHEASANT

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much the attention of the audience to them, with the consequent danger of the actors becoming half-hearted in their work.

But would not the actors in the play be less effective in their rôles owing to the fact that their garb did not allow sufficient freedom to the arms and legs in gesticulation? The actors' fears were all the more justified inasmuch as the author's original intention was to do away with facial expression altogether; he wished to have these actors cover their faces with masks representing the Birds and Animals they were to enact. Without going as far back as the ancient Greeks whose theatrical performers, as we know, wore hideous masks and the stilted cothurnus when presenting their great masterpieces in verse, let us relate an experience of our own with reference to this matter. A number of years ago we went in company with a friend to see an Italian *fantocci* show in Boston. It was a dingy little place, although its front wall covered with large flamboyant daubs and inscriptions indicated that they were to present the "Taking of Taormina" on that day. We need scarcely explain that the Italian *fantocci* are vast puppets used in a

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Punch and Judy show on a heroic scale, and this was the case with the puppets we saw in Boston. The warriors bold and the romantic ladies—those within and about Taormina—were life-like in size, and perhaps even larger than that. It was in vain that the reader from behind the scenes tried to put life in us by his passionate narration of the story, we were altogether too conscious of the hands high above the stage that from time to time were seen prodding and heaving long irons with which they manipulated the gawky knights, now making them raise one arm, now another, or shoving them limping off the stage. But our curiosity in this respect being soon satisfied, we began to pay more attention to the story. The grotesqueness of the show was soon lost sight of, the *fantocci* became mere shadows, faint adumbrations, that helped to sustain the images that the story awakened in our minds.

After we left that strange dark chamber, we compared notes as to our impressions, and we were surprised to find to what extent we had mentally participated in the action of the story. We attributed this to the fact that a double appeal, equally

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strong, to eye and ear, is to the detriment of the one or the other. We also concluded that when the attention was shifted now to the one, now to the other, the inward vision was not allowed to have undisturbed play, and the story suffered in consequence: in the case of the poetic drama, it was the verse, the poetic vision, that under those conditions likewise suffered in consequence.

In order to bring this point nearer home, let us ask whether the state of reverie brought about and sustained in us by sound, as the ticking of a clock, the trickling of a stream, the drizzling of rain upon the loft; or by sight, as by gazing on flaming logs, or on crystal balls, whether, we ask, that state of reverie would not be rendered difficult or at least be greatly disturbed, should we attempt to divide our attention and give heed at the same time to crystal gazing and to the trickling of the stream, to the flaming of logs, and to the sound of drizzling rain. Even in attempts the most artistic to weld motion and sound, as in the dancing of Isadora Duncan to the music of Beethoven, who will say that the attention is not drawn now to the one, now to the other, thus disturbing the unity of

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both, and, furthermore, who will affirm that the moods and visions awakened in him are not altogether too fleeting, too fragmentary, because of the divided interest in the music and the dance?

This leads us to conclude with regard to the poetic drama, for it is with reference to the poetic drama that the foregoing remarks are made, that our modern attempts to lay so much stress on costumes and stage settings, on everything in fact that appeals too powerfully to the eye, are a detriment to the verse. The Greek method of presentation of the drama, and the method Rostand would have adopted and in part did adopt, ridiculous as it may seem, has its justification, and this justification lies in the very nature of the workings of the mind. We cannot take in at the same time two things equally well. The animated pictures from the kinetoscope may rightfully appeal strongly to the eye, and none will say that it is the claptrap piano that can or does detract from their interest; but the poetic drama must be presented in a manner to appeal mainly to the ear. In this direction lies logic, since truth must guide art.

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Coquelin was no less perturbed than the Pheasant regarding the possible ineffectiveness of his rôle when not aided by more or less large, or subtle gestures. Coquelin was essentially an actor given over to romantic and comic parts. He had a wonderful voice, richly resonant and of unusual range, and he also had dash. The character of Cyrano de Bergerac, through which he carried Rostand to universal fame, was essentially brilliant. It called for considerable action and sparkled with wit. It was eminently fitted to Coquelin's nature. The character of the Cock is equally varied, no less brilliant, no less exacting than the rôle of Cyrano, it demands even larger powers of voice, and is, besides, if not so consistent nor so subtle, far more poetic than Cyrano. How could the actor present all this without adding to the voice the full freedom of the limbs? M. Edel, the well known artistic costumer, undertook to reassure Coquelin with regard to that matter.

M. Edel had been called upon to design all the costumes for *Chantecler*. It was an arduous task. He was for months at work on the subject, and the two hundred sketches or more, of cocks, and hens,

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and what not, attest the difficulty of his undertaking. Not only was he to be true to nature, in so far as that was expedient for the purpose of the play, but he was also to see to the comfort and satisfy the vanity of those who were to wear the clothes. Furthermore, the costumes were to be in keeping with the characters as portrayed in the drama, for these animals were also symbols, each stood for an idea, and the costume was to suggest that idea. These costumes were, then, to be made for comfort,—not too warm, not too heavy, nor too complicated to put on; they were to be artistic,—shapely and attractive to the eye; and over and above all that they were to suggest the character each animal assumed in the play. M. Edel was so far successful in this that the last and final drawings he sent to Rostand at Cambo, elicited the enthusiastic approval of the author. “The drawings of M. Edel,” Rostand wrote in a telegram to the managers of the Porte-Saint-Martin, “idealize my work.”

It still remained to please the actors in the cast. The success of M. Edel in convincing Coquelin as to the adaptability of the plans mapped out

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with regard to the costuming, would to all intents and purposes have served to bring conviction to the other members of the troupe. M. Edel's birds necessarily had wings; these wings could not be used with the freedom of a foil; a certain amount of reserve was necessary in gesticulation. It so happened that one day M. Edel went to see Coquelin at a time when the great actor was still enjoying his morning bath. M. Edel talked costumes, and this led the conversation on the topic of Rostand's verse. Coquelin leaned his head back, and began declaiming in magnificently resonant tones the Cock's great song to the Sun in the first act of *Chantecler*. M. Edel listened, and then, when Coquelin was through, he smiled and pointed out to the Cock that in reciting that great song his hands had not been taken out once from the bath. The parts, therefore, could surely be presented without the customary large gestures; there was no doubt as to that. Coquelin had to give in, and M. Edel's plans were adopted.

Another matter that called for attention was the relative dimensions of the actors and the theatrical properties. The first act, for instance, is situated

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in a barn-yard. Looking at the illustrations of the stage setting for that act, we see to the right of the spectators a kennel for the philosophic Patou, above the kennel there hangs a bridle to which are attached many jingling bells, then comes a stable, and behind that a hay stack; the Cat is perched high up on large stone flags lying between the stable and an abandoned cart of which the shafts are seen pointing to the sky; next we have a path leading away from the barnyard to the fine stretch of fields seen in the distance; to the extreme left is a cage for the Black-bird, above the cage is a halter, and below these some ninepins, a ball, and a wooden shoe. There is so much open space in the kennel and in the cage in which are M. Jean Coquelin, as the Dog, and M. Galipaux, the Black-bird, that the cage and the kennel and all the other objects on the stage must have been made enormously large. This was indeed the case, for every object on the stage had to be in keeping with the proportions established by the height of the Cock. A chair in the third act, for instance, was three meters high, and the fruits and flowers and all the objects on the stage were enlarged in pro-

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portion. It was like mural painting, this feeling for the congruous and for fine perspective.

M. Rostand had good reasons to thank M. Amable, M. Paquereau, and M. Jusseaume, for the scenic arrangements in *Chantecler*. We remember with keen pleasure the exquisite studies in miniature of scenes and stage decorations exhibited in Paris by these artists two years ago. Like M. Edel, their purpose in *Chantecler* was to see to the comfort of the players, attend to the beauty of the whole, and help as much as possible to create an atmosphere in keeping with the play.

The beautiful scenes for the second and fourth acts of *Chantecler* are by M. Jusseaume. Judging once more from illustrations before us, we have, for the second act, a beautiful stretch of arable land with gently undulating hills in the distance. A winding stream flows towards us from those hills, and seems to stretch out arms along its path in a desire to give richly of itself to every thirsty nook and patch of verdure. Here and there tall poplars stand out like sentinels on duty, or like fine church spires pointing to the sky. This scene gains by contrast with the scene for the

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fourth act. The latter is closed in; it is somber; it suggests not labor and duty, but waste and danger. The old trees of the forest reach out their thick branches to one another with undulations that call to mind huge boa constrictors. In the center, we see an enormous bare trunk, half burnt and caved in; there is also a large poisonous toadstool seen rising near the huge gap. These are fine scenes, fully suggestive of the main theme in each of the acts for which they are designed. M. Jusseaume has brought the heart and brain of a poet to his interpretation of Rostand's poetic dream.

When all is said, when we have passed in review the host of carpenters, mechanics, electricians, tailors, flower makers, feather venders, who directly or indirectly solicited the attention of the author,—for nothing was decided upon without the approval of M. Rostand; when we have stopped to consider the many rehearsals of the play at which the author's presence was necessary; when we have realized all the difficulties that had to be overcome before everything could be made to move smoothly and harmoniously in the effort

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to create in the minds of the hearers an illusion as of a splendid dream, then we come to the starting point of our study, to pass from there to the study of the play itself, for "the play is the thing."

